

# We have to live in the future

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Governments and health authorities are expressing concern about increasing levels of obesity, diabetes and physical inactivity in children. In response to such concerns, it is common to adapt strategies for adults to children, and to conduct adult-focused research. This paper describes a research study commissioned by the South Australian government that sought to involve children aged younger than 12 years in defining their meanings and views about physical activity. The research is being used to plan strategies to increase children's participation in physical activity. The qualitative study combined focus groups, drawing and mapping techniques and photographic methods with 204 children aged 4–12 years in metropolitan and rural South Australia. This paper reports results from two of the research questions: What are children's theories of physical activity, play and sport? What do children want to tell adults? Results indicate that children were enthusiastic participants in the research and appreciated the opportunity to communicate their views. The terms 'physical activity' and 'exercise' had little meaning for children, who described them as terms adults use. 'Play' and 'sport' had powerful, contrasting meanings for children: with 'play' child-centred and 'sport' controlled by adults. Children had mixed views on the power of sporting heroes as role models, on computers and television as the enemy of physical activity and on links between physical activity and health status. The research demonstrates that children bring to the discourse about physical activity some ideas that challenge the views adults hold about children. It is recommended that strategies to increase children's participation in physical activity are designed using research with children.

Keywords: *Child-centred research; Physical activity; Children's perceptions*

## Children, physical activity, participation and the future

The title of this paper comes from the words of a child in a focus group from a class of 9–10 year olds in an Australian capital city. The focus group was part of an Australian qualitative study of 204 children aged 4–12 years, and this paper reports results from two of the research questions:

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- (1) What are children's theories of physical activity, play and sport?
- (2) What do children want to tell adults?

'We have to live in the future' was an explicit message from the focus group to the government department that sponsored the research and would receive the final report and recommendations. That department, the South Australia Department of Human Services, commissioned the research to inform a physical activity strategy for primary school age children. This paper summarizes the research study, the methods used to seek the views of children and the major findings from the study.

Physical inactivity is a public health risk that is becoming more prevalent and is considered to be one of the most important risk factors for all-cause mortality (Sallis & Owen, 1999). Sufficient levels of physical activity are only achieved by one-half of the South Australian adult population (South Australia Department of Human Services, 2002). It is argued that being active everyday is important for children's physical, social, emotional, cognitive and spiritual health (Children's Health Development Foundation, 2000); however, many Australian children are not active enough to benefit their health. There is evidence that fitness has been declining in Australian school children over the past generation (Dolman *et al.*, 1999). Over 20% of Australian children are not active enough to benefit their health (Booth, 2000) and many are overweight or obese (Bauman *et al.*, 2002). In the United States the percentage of young people who are overweight has almost doubled in the past 20 years (Troiano & Flegal, 1998).

Health authorities encourage physical activity in young people because of the assertion that lifetime physical activity and health patterns are, or should be, established in childhood, such that active children would translate into active adults. Governments are concerned about increasing obesity and decreasing physical activity in children in developed countries and are exploring effective policies, research and health promotion programmes (Bauman *et al.*, 2002). In May 2003 the South Australian government announced a Ministerial Physical Activity Forum, involving the six Cabinet Ministers responsible for the portfolios of Local Government, Planning, Recreation and Sport, Transport, Education, Health and Tourism. Each of these agencies delivers programmes and/or services that influence the physical activity levels of the South Australian population. The Forum is responsible for overseeing the implementation of a Physical Activity Strategy for South Australia. The Department of Human Services will implement a physical activity strategy for children aged 8–12, using the results of the research reported in this paper.

Contemporary research and practice increasingly promotes *community participation* as a hallmark of the design, delivery and evaluation of human services (MacDougall, 2001). Community participation is one of the six principles underlying the primary health care approach, and community action is one of the cornerstones of current education and health promotion orthodoxy. The World Health Organisation's (1986) Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion describes community participation as one of the primary health care principles underpinning all five approaches and, in relation to adults, Australian governments have moved to increase participation (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995, 2000).

The early childhood literature describes young children as a special population about which we know very little, but for whom participation in physically active play and physical activity programmes is preferable to adult-tailored fitness/exercise programmes (Seefeldt, 1984; Seefeldt & Voegel, 1989). Gallahue and Ozman (2002) agreed, arguing that children move to learn and, in so doing, 'learn to move'. In the process of establishing fundamental movement patterns they can achieve sufficient participation in physical activity. Pangrazi *et al.* (1996); established that 30 minutes per day of moderate physical activity is helpful for younger children to maintain fitness appropriate for their age and stage of development.

In the literature on participation and health there are two important beliefs. The first is that involving people in health initiatives improves the quality and effectiveness of these initiatives. The second is that participation helps overcome community and individual powerlessness and results in people being healthier (Putland *et al.*, 1997). The current debate about social capital suggests that the fabric of civic society is an important determination of the health of a community, and encouraging participation helps to weave and strengthen this fabric (Baum, 2002). Participation, however, is a complex and contested concept involving power relationships. The four types of participation summarized by Baum (2002) differ in terms of the extent to which participation involves a transfer of power from the state or experts to communities or populations.

Particularly with children, the more the consultation or participation implies a transfer of power, the more contested it becomes. This is because it necessarily deals with issues of conflicting agendas and ideologies, power, organizational structure and the training and status of professionals. It is partly for this reason that the literature about children and participation contrasts sharply with the adult literature. There are relatively few examples of thorough programmes to consider children as advocates. The notion of changing institutional structures to advocate for children is contested, especially in relation to notions of democracy, citizenship and children's rights (Aynsley-Green *et al.*, 2000). Recent literature addresses the devaluing of children's perspectives and calls for children's voices to be heard (Dockett, 2000). Some of the barriers that make it difficult to hear children's voices may be:

- (1) The centrality in public opinion and politics of arguments emphasizing the responsibilities of family, parents and other adults for children (Aynsley-Green *et al.*, 2000).
- (2) Institutional and professional structures with a tradition of doing things for and to children (Kalnins *et al.*, 1992; de Winter *et al.*, 1999).
- (3) The assumption that, due to their developmental stage, children must be nurtured, guided and educated but not given adult-like responsibility (de Winter *et al.*, 1999).
- (4) The idea that children cannot contribute to debates about their needs and the needs of other children derived from the observation that they lack the capacity for abstract thinking that characterizes later adolescence and adulthood (Connell *et al.*, 1975).

- (5) The suspicion that standard research methods (such as interviewing) may not be applicable to children and that the most appropriate methodology for needs assessments is to seek the opinions of significant adults such as parents and service providers (Kalnins *et al.*, 1992; Sandbaek, 1999).
- (6) The assumption that children can be treated like mini adults in human service campaigns and interventions (Kalnins *et al.*, 1992). Under this assumption, programmes for adults are modified for children by changing language and images, but not the underlying principles.

Helping children to articulate their opinions about the environment and stimulating the development of social responsibility is a crucial, but often forgotten, factor in the prevention of psychosocial problems and promotion of health and well-being for children. Thus a serious dialogue with children about matters concerning the quality of life should be considered not only a basic right, but also a precondition for the promotion of health and well-being (de Winter *et al.*, 1999).

The development of children and young people is now described as a process of interaction between individual and environment, taking place within a given culture and context. Children grow psychologically in response to the physical, cultural and social circumstances they encounter (Bricher, 1999).

## **Methodology**

### *Research paradigm*

The choice of the research paradigm was important. Quantitative methods are effective for measuring levels of physical activity across time, place and age, and for determining associations with demographic, psychological, social and environmental factors. Quantitative methods can also contribute to the assessment of impact and outcome of campaigns and strategies (Baum, 2002). However, this research deals with a very new area of inquiry that required an understanding of how children, at a particular developmental stage, experience, describe and respond to the notion of physical activity. Qualitative methods, informed by a constructivist paradigm (Crotty, 1998), became the methods of choice for gaining a deep understanding of children's descriptions and experiences of physical activity. This qualitative research should lead to ideas that are available to further investigations combining various mixes of qualitative and quantitative methods. However, at this stage of knowledge, quantitative methods are inappropriate and qualitative methods are favoured.

### *Focus groups and mapping*

We used focus groups because they reflect the way children form ideas about their world by discussing topics and experiences in a group; frequently as part of the teaching process. Therefore, focus groups in the school setting were a natural way to conduct research. To plan our focus groups, we used our experience in research methods and child development to take into account effects of group dynamics, peer

pressure, gender dynamics and stage of development in the generation of discussion in the group. We took into account and modified good practice to apply to this age group in sampling (MacDougall & Fudge, 2001) and the issue of the group dynamics in planning and interpreting focus groups (MacDougall & Baum, 1997).

At the end of each focus group we invited children to draw and discuss a map of the social and physical environments in which they are most likely to participate in physical activity. Mapping elicited individual responses, individual interpretations and used non-verbal methods of eliciting information. It also allowed free responses and individual interpretations of the questions from the focus groups. Mapping allowed children to use a graphic expressive technique to elaborate on verbal concepts. Mapping also provided the opportunity for children to position themselves in the family, school and community. In some groups, we introduced an additional drawing task, inviting children to draw images or write slogans that could encourage other children to be more physically active.

Detailed notes about process, context and discussion were taken during each focus group by a non-participating observer, then transcribed and discussed with the facilitators before being confirmed and the facilitators then annotated maps with relevant explanations.

*Photovoice*

For photovoice (Morrow, 2001), we invited children from focus groups to help us further by taking photographs with a disposable camera that we provided. We selected children (including some with high and low activity and others on the basis of their maps), then provided them with a form and information sheet to take home seeking consent for us to provide a disposable camera for the children to use. We asked children, with adult supervision if necessary, to take photographs over the next week and to write a brief caption for each photograph, saying why they took it and what the photograph meant to them in relation to physical activity. Photovoice was designed to generate different and complementary information because of its visual (rather than verbal) nature and its potential to sharpen a focus on people and places that were important to individual children at home, at school and in the community.

*Interviews with salient adults*

We interviewed a sample of adults from the children’s schools (Table 1) and sought their reaction to the responses emerging from interviews with children.

Table 1. Sample of seven adults

Place	People
Rural primary school 1	Principal
Rural primary school 2	Principal
Metropolitan primary school	Principal and three teachers

*Quality and ethics*

The principal researchers were all very experienced so they conducted most interviews with children and adults and analysed all the data. The South Australia Department of Human Services set up a local reference group that assisted the researchers and commented on the research. Formally constituted ethics committees at Flinders University, University of South Australia, and the Department of Education, Employment and Training approved the research design. The researchers established a technical reference group of international collaborators to assist with the research methodology and interpretation of data.

A requirement for rigour in qualitative research is triangulation of research methods. We used four data collection methods to triangulate data and to gain information from different modalities. Further requirements for rigour are researcher and discipline triangulation (Baum, 2002). Each of the three chief investigators is from a different discipline background and so brought discipline triangulation to the data analysis. In addition, we involved coresearchers, from a range of disciplines, in developing coding frames, liaised with the project's reference group and consulted with the international collaborators as needed.

*Rationale for sampling and original estimate of sample*

Sampling in qualitative research is purposive and theoretical (Baum, 2002; Crotty, 1998), so in this study the sample comprised children aged 8–12 years, from low socioeconomic rural and metropolitan areas, with an emphasis on those with low levels of physical activity. We sampled from schools because the school is both an institution that most children attend and an important contributor to physical activity. Guided by the saturation principle, we stopped sampling when we were no longer gaining new ideas or themes from the analysis of data. If taken to its logical extreme, however, adherence to the saturation principle would have made it difficult for us to propose a sample size, time line and budget. Therefore we used our experience as researchers to suggest a sample size to enable planning to take place.

The research plan originally estimated a sample of 10–20 focus groups, averaging eight children aged 8–12 years per group, from six to 14 schools; or 80–160 children, 40–80 children who would be asked to draw maps and 12 for photovoice. However, based on early experience in focus groups, we revised this and asked all children in focus groups to draw maps. In some groups, we offered more children the opportunity to use photovoice than others because of the group dynamics and level of interest. We offered cameras to children on the basis of them being judged high or low in physical activity, as well as demonstrating interesting features in their maps. We estimated a sample of 8–10 salient adults from schools in individual and small group interviews.

Table 2 presents the distribution of the sample of 204 children in focus groups and the mapping exercise by year and gender. In all but three groups (Ridgehaven Primary and Fisk St Primary Student Representative Council and St Teresa's Primary Year 3/4) there were about equal numbers of boys and girls.

Table 2. Sample of children: 204 in focus groups and mapping and 32 in photovoice

School	Focus group and mapping	Male	Female	Photo voice	Male	Female
Ridgehaven Primary	Year 3/4	5	5			
Ridgehaven Primary	SRC 3–7	3	9			
Ridgehaven Primary	Year 6/7 boys	13	0			
Ridgehaven Primary	Year 6/7 girls	0	13			
Reynella South Primary	Year 3–7	2	5	7	2	5
St Teresa's Primary (rural)	Year 2/3	3	3	3	1	2
St Teresa's Primary	Year 3/4	7	12	4	1	3
St Teresa's Primary	Year 4/5	6	6	1	1	
St Teresa's Primary	Year 5/6	7	7	2	1	1
St Teresa's Primary	Year 6/7	5	5	2	1	1
Gillies Plains Primary	Year 2/3 and year 4/5	5	6	7	4	3
Gillies Plains Primary	Year 6/7 boys	10	0	2	2	
Gillies Plains Primary	Year 6/7 girls	0	11	4		4
Paralowie (primary)	Year 2/3	5	4	n/a		
Paralowie (primary)	Year 5/6	4	6	n/a		
Paralowie (primary)	Junior Council	12	11	n/a		
Fisk St Primary (rural)	SRC R-7	3	11			
Total		90	114	32	13	19

Notes: In South Australia children commence school at age 5 in reception, then move through years 1–12. There are more children than cameras because some cameras were given to groups. Cameras were not distributed at Paralowie.

## Results

This section summarizes the overall results (Table 3) and discusses in more detail children's views about the future, and issues on which they tended to disagree with common adult views.

### *Sport: meaning and decisions*

'Sport' was immediately recognized in all focus groups with a distinctive meaning making it difficult to move the discussion to other topics. Sport was not distinguished from other terms merely by the activities involved, but because of the affect of purpose and competition (although fun was sometimes involved). Children perceived that talent for a sport was essential if they were to be selected for a sporting team. Then they needed the capacity to train and pay for transport and equipment—which was beyond the reach of many children interviewed.

The following excerpt from Metropolitan School C is typical of the way the word 'sport' had a particular meaning and was powerful in keeping the discussion in line with that meaning:

Table 3. Summary of results from children

Theme	'Sport'	'Play'	'Physical activity', 'exercise', 'fitness' <sup>a</sup>
Words and images: top of mind recognition	Immediate and distinctive	Immediate and distinctive: frequently energises children	Takes time to recognize Difficult to distinguish from 'sport' and 'play'
Activities	Team sports, individual sports Games, play	Group games and individual games Sports, individual activities Socializing	Mixture of activities included under 'sport' and 'play' as well as a broader range
Engagement and affect	High, enduring engagement Affect of purpose, competition, organization, often fun (not always)	High, enduring engagement Affect of fun, freedom, spontaneity, energy and physicality	No engagement, no distinctive affect 'Physical activity' is an adult word not used by children  'Exercise' can connote work, purpose, lack of fun
Choice, planning and decision-making styles	Adult-led, pre-planned rule-bound  Hierarchical decisions, <i>power-over</i>	Child-centred, spontaneous and avoiding boredom  Plan and adjust as they go  Democratic decisions, <i>power-with</i>	No distinctive theme: mixes adult and child-centred decisions
Place, equipment and facilities	School, indoor and outdoor facilities  Equipment as per rules  Travel arrangements	School, home, friend's houses, parks  Improvise with available equipment	No distinctive theme

Action: enablers and barriers	<p><b>Enablers</b>  Adults to organize and transport  Facilities, clubs and equipment    Parental modelling</p> <p><b>Barriers</b>  Injuries  Cost, distance and travel  Lack of facilities, clubs  Bullying, put-downs, humiliation,  gender issues</p>	<p><b>Enablers</b>  Adult encouragement  Culture of democratic decision-making    Time and space and enough equipment</p> <p><b>Barriers</b>  Not as popular with Year 6/7  Arguments</p>	No distinctive theme. Some mention of ‘Just do it’
Advocacy and effective messages	<p>Fun and friends  Children as role models  Famous people talking about children or childhood  Show opportunities and possibilities</p>	<p>Fun, friends  Adult encouragement</p>	No distinctive theme actions

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<sup>a</sup>Fitness was more distinctive but was associated with slogans and clichés about health, without a detailed understanding.

- Question: When physical activity is mentioned, what do you think about?  
Answer: Running, exercise, all different sports.
- Question: What types of sport would you be thinking of?  
Answer: Soccer, swimming, football, basketball, netball, all the games that I play.
- Question: Can you talk to me about exercise, do you think differently?  
Answer: Weight-lifting/gym, muscle building, running/treadmill, people walking, stretching & warming-up, gym circuits, meditating, Taibo.
- Question: If we talk about fitness, what do you think of?  
Answer: Running around generally, fitness levels, walking/power walking, running/laps of the oval, long distance running, sport, how fit you are/fitness levels.
- Question: Any difference between sport and fitness activity?  
Answer: Both come under the one bracket.

In this example, when the facilitator included the term ‘sport’ in the first question, the discussion turned to predominantly organized team sport. These meanings persisted despite question about ‘exercise’ and ‘fitness’. Only when the facilitator asked about ‘play’ did the meaning change. Throughout this and the other three focus groups at Metropolitan School C, the dominant meanings of physical activity were associated with sport and it was difficult to get a broader discussion of physical activity on the agenda.

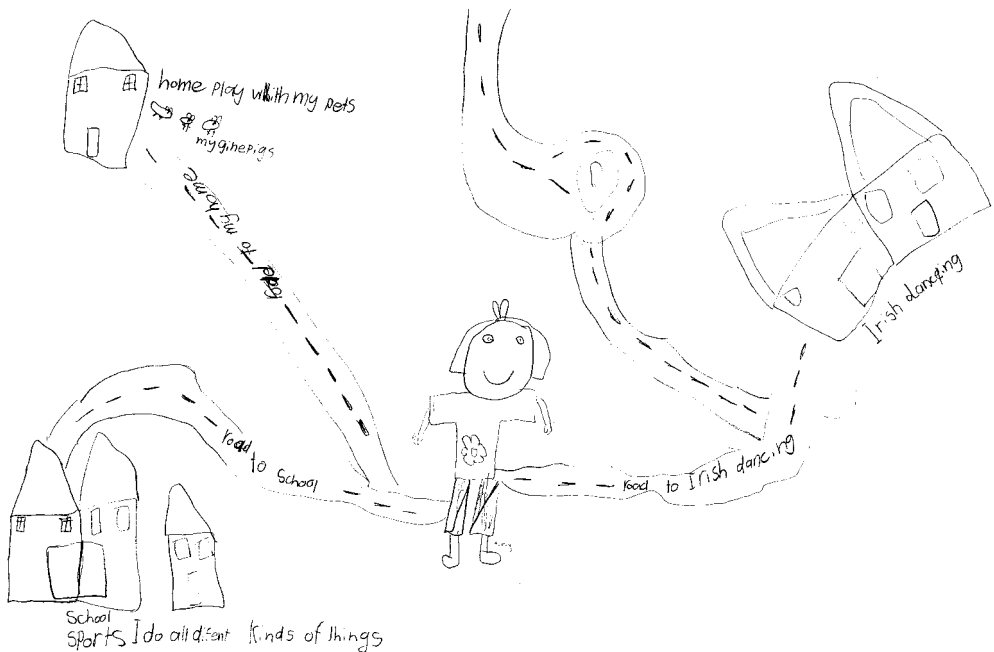


Figure 1. ‘Mind map’ of play and fun from a student council of 5–11 year olds at a metropolitan school

A powerful discriminator between 'sport' and other terms was the way choices were made. Adults were influential in making these choices, often within predetermined rules that required particular facilities and equipment. Adults were also important to provide money, resources, time and transport. Considerable school and community investment in clubs and facilities is necessary to maintain sport.

When Metropolitan School D year 5 and 6 boys and girls were asked who decides about sport they all said 'teachers', and some then said 'boring'. At Metropolitan School B, boys aged 11–13 years said 'Themselves, parents'. One boy illustrated a common role for parents when he said: 'I choose they pay!'

Year 3/4 at Rural School B said that for sport 'the fairest is the captain, the one who doesn't muck around. The coach picks them'. In terms of who organizes sport, they said: 'Coaches, teachers organise, Mum and Dad might organise, go at a particular time, the president of club, the captain of team might organise'.

*Play: meaning and decisions*

The meaning of 'play' was immediately recognizable in all focus groups as different from sport, physical activity and fitness. While distinctive, play did not dominate because discussion of play could move to discussion of sport and physical activity,

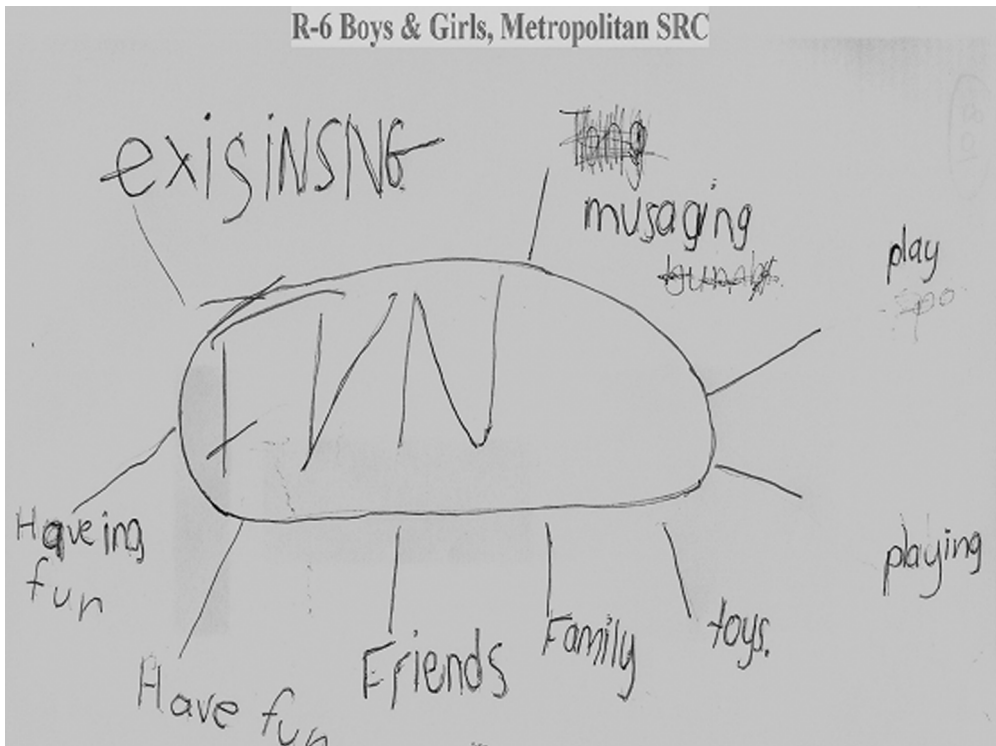


Figure 2. 'Mind map' of play and fun from a student council of 5–11 year olds at a metropolitan school

then back to play. Play, however, had a powerful enough meaning for children to counteract sport's distinctive attributes by moving the group discussion from sport to play. The terms 'physical activity', 'exercise' and 'fitness' could not do this.

Play was distinguished by 'fun', 'spontaneity', 'interactions with friends', 'not too competitive', 'not too aggressive'. For example, we saw earlier that at Metropolitan School C children from years 3–7 in the student representative council persistently defined physical activity in sporting terms. The following example repeats the earlier quotation about sport and physical activity, but introduces a question about 'play', with the new responses outlined in bold. It is important to note the way 'play' immediately changed the meaning of physical activity, introducing the importance of fun, friends, spontaneity and less structured activities:

Question: When physical activity is mentioned, what do you think about?

Answer: Running, exercise, all different sports.

Question: What types of sport would you be thinking of?

Answer: Soccer, swimming, football, basketball, netball, all the games that I play.

Question: Can you talk to me about exercise, do you think differently?

Answer: **Weight-lifting/gym, muscle building, running/treadmill, people walking, stretching & warming-up, gym circuits, meditating, Taibo.**



Figure 3. Photovoice: 11-year-old girl's photograph of play

Question: If we talk about fitness, what do you think of?

Answer: Running around generally, fitness levels, walking/power walking, running/laps of the oval, long distance running, sport, how fit you are/fitness levels.

Question: Any difference between sport and fitness activity?

Answer: Both come under the one bracket.

**Question: If I mention play, what would you think about?**

**Answer: Games, climbing equipment, 4-square, hop-scotch, skipping, running, stuck-in-the-mud, ball-games, light sports/no rough play, playing with friends, it is more fun being with friends/more boring without friends, wider range of choices when with friends, play, fun, not too competitively, small groups of friends, can become too aggressive or competitively with too many people.**

Another example, from Years 5/6 Metropolitan School D, shows in bold the energizing effect of the term ‘play’ and the way play is powerful enough to move the discussion away from sport:

Question: What does sport mean?

Answer: Netball, soccer, basketball, archery, football, tennis, volleyball, hockey, badminton, track running, table tennis, swimming, skiing, horse riding, golf, lawn bowls, bocce, hiking, dancing, kayaking, speedway, bike riding, extreme sports, car racing, lap swimming, walking, exercise, running.

Injury.

Winning and losing.

**Question: What does play mean?**

**Answer: [Immediately all children sat up and their body language showed excitement and energy]**

**Fun.**

**Performing.**

**No learning.**

**Enjoyment.**

**Running around.**

**No policemen.**

**Takes out the anger, if angry at teachers go out and have fun.**

When we mentioned ‘play’ in a younger group of seven to eight year olds at a metropolitan school, one boy stood up, put up his hand and asked if he could do a role-play. He then demonstrated running around and playing chasey, to the delight of the group. We then encouraged children to move around, by jumping on the spot during the discussion and regularly breaking in to a game of chasey: this became known as the ‘jumping focus group!’

Play, however, is not always physical. It can also include reading, watching television (TV), talking, playing alone with toys/games, dolls or stuffed animals. A number of focus groups mused, somewhat quizzically, that ‘you play sport’, as if they had trouble putting the two words together. In play, adults do not direct but

encourage without having to provide extensive resources. A powerful distinguishing characteristic of play is the way choices and decisions are made. Children choose, using processes that demonstrate age and gender differences. Children own play, and adjust the way they play depending on the numbers, abilities and preferences of children involved. They also take into account available facilities, equipment and the need to avoid boredom. Facilities and equipment certainly facilitate play, but do not have to be as prescriptive as those required for sport. Play reflected interactions between aged groups and a sense of neighbourhood and community.

When we examined how children choose activities at Metropolitan School C, the student representative council, years 3–7, said they ‘talk it over with friends, discuss what to do, occurs spontaneously, depends on the sporting or play equipment available at the time, may join in game already under way’. In another junior council from Reception to Year 6 at Metropolitan School D, the group agreed that children decide on rules for play and adults decide rules for sport. They said that, for play, children in groups take turns at choosing a leader, make up a game and try to make it easy or fun. The student representative council (reception–year 7) at Rural School A said: ‘Sometimes [a teacher] gives choices, but if there are no teachers they choose what most want to play’. They also suggested they ‘put up their hands, get ideas, use a roster, and vote [for younger children]’. They also said ‘if it is not what you want to do, put up with it or do something else’.

We asked children variations on: Where do you play? What do you do? Who chooses what you will play? How? Year 2/3 children at Rural School B answered as follows:

- Shared playground, everyone gets a turn [all kids agree].
- Choice of activity might have a bit of vote, majority rules.
- Sometimes one chooses.
- Some play on the see saw, some do other things.
- Can do more than one thing during lunch time.
- Play with two or three/three or four different people.
- Play with about seven people.
- Play different things.

*Children want adults to love, listen and laugh with them*

Children participated enthusiastically and enjoyed the research process. Year 6/7 children strongly argued that they wanted to be heard and often were not listened to. Older children articulated their desire to be treated as teenagers or young adults—for example, by moving from modified to adult rules and being consulted. Some of the ideas from children may surprise, or provide a different perspective from adult discourses. We told the year 5/6 group at Paralowie Primary that we would present our findings to a committee. We asked what we should say, and the children replied with the following ideas:

- Adults don’t listen.
- Adults should be kids, show how we feel about things.
- Stop talking about politics.

Tell adults who is boss.  
Be kids.  
Enjoy life.  
Make a life.  
Parents' actions show us, sometimes they are wrong.  
Stop talking about money and tell us what the future is going to be.  
Experience it for themselves.  
Talk about this research on the news.  
Tell them to come and talk to us for a day.  
Tell parents to love and care for us and not just to care about themselves.  
We have to live in the future.

When we asked Paralowie's reception-year 6 student representative council the same question, they replied: 'Always have fun. Make new games.'

### *Children's views on TV as an enemy of physical activity*

Children did not consider TV and computer games as barriers to physical activity. They see them as consistently coexisting and often promoting activity. Most expressed surprise and incredulity when we told them that many adults described TV and computer games as barriers to physical activity. They described a world in which homework, TV, the computer, sport and play could and should coexist. At the same time, they appreciated rules and guidelines for the TV and computer, and some expressed a desire for adults to take more control. Many were moved to try physical activity after seeing options on TV. Others said they could only watch TV for so long (often when bored) before wanting to play. Yet others combined activity and television by recording programmes to watch after they had enjoyed play or sport.

For example, rural School B years 3/4 said that 'TV gets started me started on sports. I watch my favourite TV show or do sport on another day. I do both. TV is better. I watch videos then do stuff after. I watch TV then go out and play.' The junior council at Metropolitan School D said 'there are more fun things than watching TV all day' and ... 'rules were no TV until homework is done. You can do play and watch TV as well, can do both'.

### *Famous adults as role models*

Children were divided about the value of using famous adults when promoting physical activity. Those who said it would work argued adults would have to refer to children or their own childhood. Rural School B years 4/5 were asked 'How can we persuade others to participate in physical activity?' They suggested: 'Use famous people. Meet them and they can teach sport—teach and tell people. We would believe them. Show about being fit and unfit—show how good it is to be fit'.

On the other hand, the year 5/6 group at Rural School B was asked, in small groups, to design campaigns increase children's participation in sport. One small group suggested using famous people, while others in the larger group said it would not work. We asked what would happen if Wayne Carey (a famous Australian Football

League footballer who was in the rural area at the time) walked in and said ‘you should play football’. They immediately said they would not. However, they might if they heard Wayne Carey talking about when he was a kid, or they might if he said what happens if they did not play sport.

### *Children’s links between physical activity and health status*

Many adults understand the arguments about links between physical activity and health status, including the notion of a desirable minimum amount of activity (Wright *et al.*, 1996). In contrast, we found that children were unclear about how active they were in comparison with others, or whether they should do more physical activity. Some older children missed school-based physical activity when it was reduced to make way for more academic subjects.

Children did not have detailed interest in and understandings of health benefits of physical activity. Some mentioned weight, others fitness and others visits to the doctor. However, when questioned further, children could not elaborate on these links. Furthermore, when one group discussed messages to increase physical activity they said that showing adult health problems of low physical activity ‘would not work’ and ‘we would not want to see that’. It is thus unlikely that strategies heavily based on health arguments would have high recognition or engagement.

At Metropolitan School B year 6/7 boys were asked ‘What do you think we should do to encourage more children to be more active?’ They replied ‘... tell them the good things about exercise—eg it’s good for you, fun, do it or you’ll die, good for your muscles’. However, these are very vague statements. Another group, at Metropolitan School A, said ‘Sport is having fun, something to do with your body. Keep fit and healthy.’ We prompted ‘In what way?’ The reply was ‘Keep body working better, stop being stiff, do more before getting a stitch’.

## **Discussion**

If children’s views are going to help shape their futures, adult researchers need to listen to these views, conduct further research where necessary and consider how children’s views can inform and shape practice. Three findings from our research shed some light on how children’s views can shape their futures: the quality of children’s participation, the centrality in play of child-centred decisions and rules and emerging ideas from children that could take their place on the research agenda.

First, the results reveal enthusiastic participation by children, their desire to be heard and a range of ideas that, at first glance, seem novel for adult researchers. These results fit with current thinking that one way to enrich children’s psychosocial development is to expand and facilitate the possibilities for children to participate actively in their environment. The emerging social competence model of child development tries to enlarge the extent to which young persons are capable of responding adequately in their environment in day-to-day contacts. This contrasts with a deficiency model that largely determines the way of thinking and acting in child health

care (de Winter *et al.*, 1999). From the perspective of child health promotion this attitude helps teach people from a young age that they are not being considered as important social subjects, whose opinions and involvement really matter. On the contrary, they are clearly given the message that they are they are not worth listening to and that the institutions of society are anonymous entities that decide for them. From a developmental point of view, this denial of children's participation is to be considered a risk factor for adequate social and moral development as well as for the emergence of psychological problems (de Winter *et al.*, 1999). There is little doubt that children '... are a special population about which we know very little' (Seefeldt, 1984). Therefore, if we accept the principle that health promotion must address problems perceived by the public as important in the context of their everyday lives, we must seek to understand health as children themselves see it and within that their own relevant social contexts (Kalnins *et al.*, 1992).

Second, children's participation gives rise to potentially useful distinctions such as the results about the principal differences between sport and play. Our results show that play is much more child focused than sport, involving spontaneous decisions and rules made for and by children. Moreover, results suggest that mixing images of play and sport could be counter productive.

The third way in which we can use children's views to shape their futures is to add to our research agenda ideas generated by children where, for example, our research suggested that children do not share the strong adult belief that TV and computers form barriers to physical activity. They are ambivalent about using adult sporting figures as role models. Interestingly, even when focus groups probed for more information, children did not demonstrate clear and persuasive connections between improved health status and increased physical activity. These findings deserve a place on the research agenda because they each refer to ideas that are often accepted by adults as being relevant for children, when they may have no place in a child's sense of the world.

## **Conclusion**

Children have clear ideas about the places and spaces they occupy comfortably in their home, school and community. Their maps and photographs showed emotional attachments to these spaces and places. Play is a common denominator, is accessible and is owned by children. No other concept comes close in children's minds. Physical activity and exercise are adult concepts that mean organized activities. Sport requires talent, training and costs to the family.

Children were delighted for their voices and ideas to be heard. Their participation in the research demonstrates the salience and potential of the emergent sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1997; Morrow, 2003), which emphasizes children as being active social agents who shape the structures and processes around them (at least at the micro-level). Strategies to increase physical activity should therefore cast children not as passive recipients of directives from parents, teachers, other adult influencers and their environmental settings, but as active influencers over their social

and physical worlds. This is important because, as United Nations Secretary General and Nobel Peace Prize Winner Kofi Annan said, 'Tomorrow's world is already taking shape in the body and spirit of our children'.

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